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Nicaragua: Prospects for the Opposition

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*ALA 86-10014
March 1986
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Nicaragua: Prospects for the Opposition

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
[redacted] Office of African and Latin American
Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate
of Operations. [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Middle America-Caribbean
Division, ALA [redacted]

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Nicaragua: Prospects for the Opposition

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 17 March 1986
was used in this report.*

The Sandinistas are opposed by a range of insurgent, political, religious, and private-sector organizations. Of these, the armed opposition has been the chief obstacle to the full consolidation of a Marxist-Leninist, one-party state in Nicaragua. Present trends suggest that, although the opposition as a whole has scant prospect of ousting the Sandinistas in the next year, it does have the potential to be an increasingly credible threat to Sandinista rule in 1987, even as the regime moves to tighten its hold in response. External support, however, plays a critical role in determining the fortunes of all the Nicaraguan players.

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The insurgency is the driving force of the opposition, as it has made greater gains than any other component, compelling the regime to divert and disperse resources, and providing domestic groups with greater operating freedom than would otherwise be the case. It has also forced changes in Managua's political strategy and weakened the regime:

- [] the war has eroded popular support and forced them to slow "radicalization."
- Defense expenditures reportedly will absorb over 60 percent of the national budget in 1986, and the Sandinistas have announced that politically beneficial social programs will be cut while the fighting persists.
- [] the regime's preoccupation with the insurgency has been an important factor in the decision to reduce assistance to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

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The rebels' ability to sustain such pressure on the regime will hinge primarily on maintaining external support and establishing a reliable logistic network to bring materiel through neighboring countries and then on to units inside Nicaragua. Assuming current levels of external support and the resolution of these resupply problems, we believe the insurgents can sustain their present force levels and probably allow for at least some expansion of guerrilla operating areas. The rebels could also sustain their front in central Nicaragua, forcing the Sandinistas again to split their forces.

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Increased aid, in our view, would provide a major boost to insurgent fortunes, allowing for substantial growth to perhaps 25,000 combatants by 1987. The addition of military equipment would help counter the Sandinistas' considerable firepower advantage over the guerrillas and could diminish the threat posed by the regime's helicopter gunships.

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If the rebels cannot secure increased assistance, we would expect over time to see a gradual shift of the strategic balance to Managua, as its own military capabilities continue to improve and the rebels fail to keep pace. [REDACTED]

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Even with increased assistance, the rebels will still be hampered by persistent administrative, leadership, and training weaknesses that have hampered the war effort and are not susceptible to quick fixes. The insurgents are also vulnerable to uncertain support from Honduras and Costa Rica [REDACTED]

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Assuming the insurgency persists and deepens, we expect links between the armed opposition and domestic Sandinista opponents to become more frequent. In the midst of further economic deterioration, this could help gradually to galvanize greater dissent and make the Sandinistas more prone to missteps. The guerrillas probably will renew efforts to establish an urban support network [REDACTED]

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Among unarmed regime opponents in Nicaragua, the Catholic Church, under the leadership of the dynamic and popular Cardinal Obando y Bravo, will remain the most effective voice for dissent. His actions over the last six months demonstrate clear—if carefully measured—steps toward greater political action. Without substantial provocation, however, the Cardinal is still unlikely to call for antigovernment demonstrations or openly support the guerrillas. For its part, the main civilian opposition coalition—comprising a variety of political parties, trade unions, and private-sector organizations—is likely to remain weak because of internal divisions. Nevertheless, it appears determined to challenge the regime where possible. [REDACTED]

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Popular disgruntlement with the Sandinistas almost certainly will spread in coming months, especially over growing economic distress, even though its manifestations are likely to be sporadic and unfocused. Other sources of friction include the military draft, antichurch policies, and resentment of the Sandinista neighborhood committees. [REDACTED]

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We expect little change in the regime's hard line in dealing with both the rebels and civilian opposition. On the military side, the arms buildup funded by the Soviet Bloc is certain to continue, and we expect the regime to improve its use of military power. On the political side, we believe the Sandinistas will continue using the legal and security apparatus to undercut the democratic opposition, but concern over domestic and foreign reaction probably will keep them from using brutal methods to try to eliminate it totally. []

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Some changes could occur that would alter our projections, especially because external factors weigh so heavily on the perception and capabilities of the Nicaraguan players. We would expect to see a more successful insurgency if the guerrillas—in addition to stabilizing their logistic pipeline—were to win an end to operational constraints imposed by Honduras and Costa Rica and concurrently develop sustained operations in the cities, or if the Sandinistas made major errors in their management of the war or handling of internal dissidents. On the other hand, even with an improved supply and tactical situation, the position of the opposition probably would deteriorate if rifts developed among insurgent leaders, FDN commander Enrique Bermudez were assassinated, or Tegucigalpa further tightened controls over guerrilla supply and infiltration routes. []

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We believe a stronger and more viable insurgency would confront the Sandinistas with the prospect of a long and costly war that they may ultimately lose, placing increased pressure on the regime to make negotiating concessions. We believe that such pressure would result only from more substantial external aid flows and increased expertise from external sources. While initially Managua is likely to continue to take a hard line and refuse to make any significant concessions either in Contadora talks or with the internal opposition, over time this resolve may weaken. In the event the insurgency becomes a greater threat to the regime, Managua may be tempted to accept a less advantageous Contadora treaty in order to end external support to the guerrillas. On the other hand, we believe a less effective insurgency would probably eliminate the Sandinistas' incentives to make any concessions within the Contadora framework, and it would improve their prospects for favorable bilateral treaties with Honduras and Costa Rica. []

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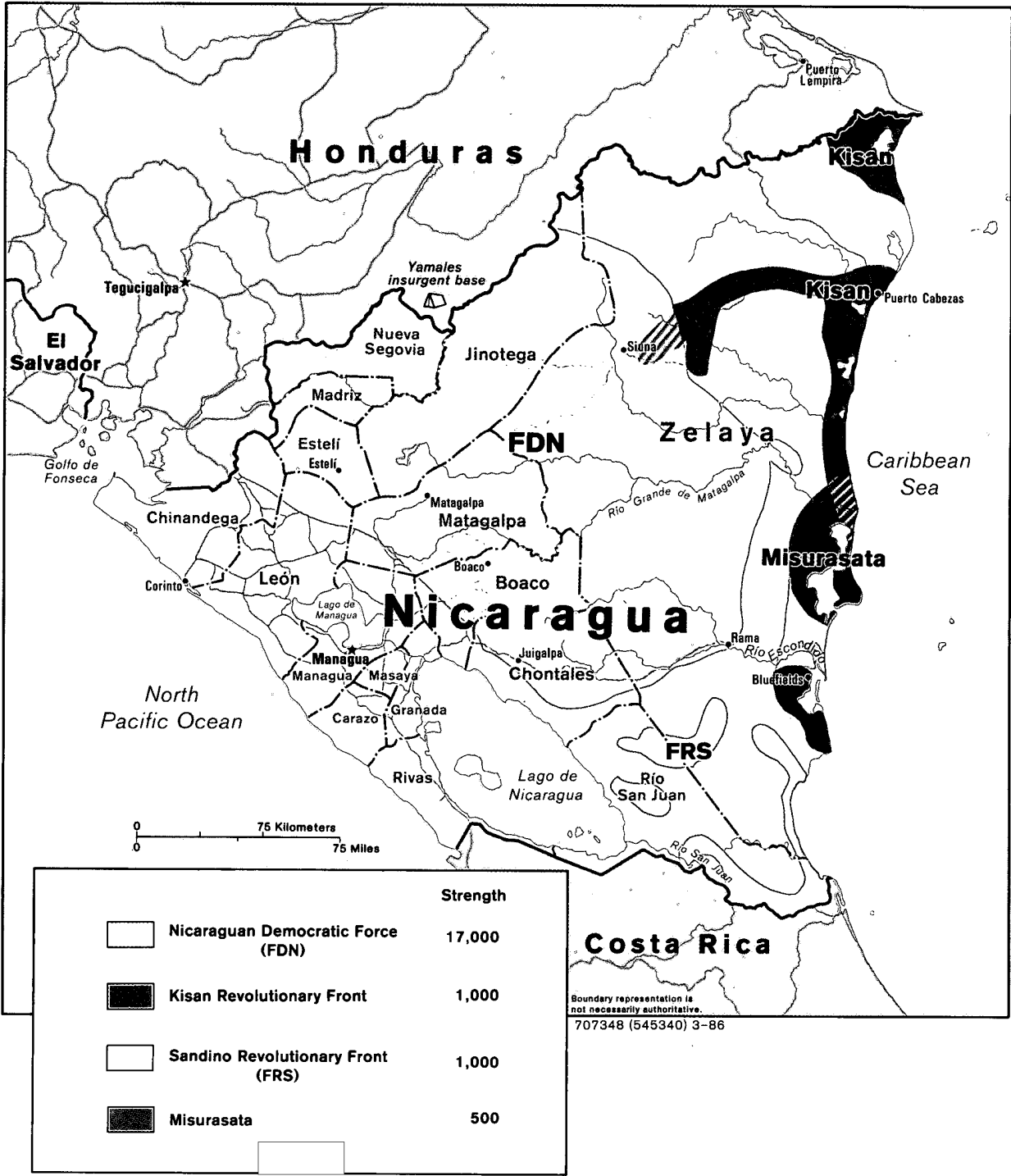
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Insurgent Operating Areas



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Nicaragua:
Prospects for the Opposition

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Introduction

In July 1979, guerrillas of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), with broad popular support, ousted the government of President Anastasio Somoza. The FSLN promised to establish a new society based on political pluralism, a mixed economy, a nonaligned foreign policy, and respect for human rights. By all accounts, the Sandinistas have not adhered to their commitment and have faced steadily expanding opposition to their regime, manifested in an armed insurgency, growing popular discontent, and persistent criticism by democratic political, business, and religious leaders. Deteriorating economic conditions have further fueled anti-Sandinista sentiments. The regime has responded by accelerating its massive military buildup, adopting increasingly repressive measures to control dissidents, and by becoming more dependent on the Soviet Bloc for economic survival.¹

This paper explores the prospects for the opposition over the next year in light of these mounting pressures on the Sandinistas. It examines the strengths and weaknesses of the insurgents and of the civic opposition and their efforts to exploit growing popular discontent. It also assesses the impact on the opposition of the Sandinistas' tactics, including the military and political aspects of their counterinsurgency strategy. Finally, this study explores likely outcomes and their implications for the United States.

The Insurgency

Growing Rebel Capabilities

The anti-Sandinista guerrillas have continued to evolve into a large and viable insurgent force, which has imposed an increasing drain on the regime's human and material resources. The US Congressional vote in 1985 to renew humanitarian aid to the insurgents had a major positive impact on the morale of resistance forces. Moreover, Sandinista statements indicate that the aid has forced the regime to reassess its prospects for a quick victory.

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Interior Minister Borge publicly admitted in mid-January that the war could go on into 1988.

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Insurgent ranks have more than doubled since the cutoff of US aid in early 1984. We estimate total armed strength at some 19,000. Growth in the various rebel groups, however, has been uneven. In northern and central Nicaragua, forces of the main insurgent organization—the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN)—grew by 2,000 in 1985 to some 17,000 relatively well-armed troops, and they enjoy considerable local support.

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recruits are drawn largely from rural areas, and insurgent units returning to bases in Honduras from Nicaragua frequently bring new volunteers. Some urban youths, disillusioned with Sandinista rule and facing conscription, also are joining the FDN. They continue to be led by Enrique Bermudez, a former National Guard officer, and other former Guard members occupy key positions on the

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[redacted]
[redacted] the FDN presence along the border has blocked some arms transfer routes through Honduras. [redacted] the Sandinistas have diverted for their own needs materiel destined for the Salvadoran guerrillas. [redacted]

Continuing Vulnerabilities

While taking an increasing toll on regime resources, the rebels are hindered by substantial problems, including:

- *Weakness in strategic planning.* The guerrillas have been unable to elaborate military objectives they hope to achieve in a given time period. Military supply uncertainties are partly to blame, but, in our view, inadequate staff and poorly trained leadership is at the heart of the problems. This has forced them to rely primarily on guerrilla tactics such as ambushes of small Sandinista units; raids on vehicles; and attacks on coffee cooperatives, collective farms, and other poorly defended government facilities. The insurgents also have not consistently targeted such basic infrastructure as electric grids and major bridges. They have attacked some militia units, but they have not moved against major garrisons. Another key deficiency is the lack of urban operations—reflecting, in our opinion, not simply the difficulties of operating in the cities but also the insurgent view that urban operations should not begin until nearby rural areas are secured.
- *Command and control difficulties.* The insurgents also continue to suffer from problems with command and control of units in the field, including uneven leadership and inadequate training. [redacted] few decisions are made when FDN commander Bermudez is away from rebel headquarters. The guerrillas also lack sufficient communications equipment and suffer lapses in communications security, leaving their operations vulnerable to Sandinista detection.

- *Supply problems.* The ability of the rebels to sustain operations has suffered from erratic logistic support and inadequate delivery means into combat zones. The failure of financial resources to keep pace with personnel growth over the past two years—even with the addition of US nonlethal aid last March—has often stranded thousands of men in Honduran base camps. Dependence on unreliable chartered aircraft for deliveries to troops in central Nicaragua frequently results in units making long marches back to Honduras for refitting. [redacted]
[redacted]
- *Uncertain external support.* Both Honduras and Costa Rica have wavered in their tolerance of anti-Sandinista activities. [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] The Hondurans have restricted the locations of rebel base camps and infiltration routes, as well as blocked deliveries of nonlethal US aid and prevented new shipments of arms to the rebels—restrictions were only lifted in late February. Likewise, Costa Rican officials periodically have restrained rebel activities to protect San Jose’s self-proclaimed neutrality, according to US Embassy and press reporting. Newly elected administrations in both countries add to the uncertainty of continued tolerance and support for rebel activities.
- *A lackluster political program.* Little progress has been made in projecting a democratic image despite the formation in June 1985 of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), a coalition of external armed and unarmed anti-Sandinista elements. In our view, UNO has defined its goals primarily in terms of establishing democratic political institutions, failing to emphasize economic and social

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Nicaragua's Counterinsurgency Strategy

Nicaragua's counterinsurgency strategy appears to be to outlast the guerrillas and their external supporters, building up its military forces while concentrating on containing the rebels in rural areas. The Sandinistas have mounted a propaganda campaign to discredit the rebels at home and abroad and attempted to generate international pressure on the United States to end its aid to them. To keep domestic opposition under control and avert the formation of an internal front, the regime declared a state of emergency in March 1982 and expanded it in October 1985. The Sandinistas have used the emergency to restrict all opposition activity and to attempt to mobilize the total population for the war effort.

The Military Dimension

In our view, the Sandinistas have been fairly successful in bringing military resources to bear against the insurgents. Managua has steadily expanded its active forces to an estimated 65,000 to 70,000 men, substantially increased its firepower, and improved its mobility. Government forces increasingly have employed heavy artillery and air attacks over the past two years and are making more frequent use of combined-arms operations. The militia, which once bore the brunt of the fighting, is now used for static defense and initial contact with the guerrillas, while the Army has deployed additional counterinsurgency battalions as heavily armed, mobile reaction forces.

The regime has sought to bottle up the rebels in their Honduran base camps and to discourage Tegucigalpa's support for them.

the Army has tried unsuccessfully to block infiltration corridors by sending more troops to the border region, laying minefields, and relocating peasants to create free-fire zones. The Sandinistas also have employed reconnaissance patrols, artillery fire, and occasional raids on rebel camps in Honduran territory. Although we believe that difficult terrain, insurgent strength, and the fear of US retaliation constrain such actions, the Sandinistas probably hope they can intimidate Honduras into decreasing its cooperation with the guerrillas.

The regime's efforts to negotiate with the chiefs of smaller insurgent groups—Eden Pastora in 1984 and Miskito Indian leader Brooklyn Rivera last year—appear to be aimed primarily at projecting an image of flexibility and encouraging divisions within rebel ranks. The Sandinistas have adamantly refused to talk to the FDN because of its alleged ties to former President Somoza's regime. Similarly, we believe that government offers of amnesty have been aimed primarily at making propaganda gains and that it has exaggerated the number of guerrillas who have accepted.

Winning Hearts and Minds

The regime has devoted considerable attention to building mass support for the war effort, but, in our view, has had little success. Nevertheless, we believe government repression has effectively inhibited the potential for popular rallying to the opposition, especially in urban areas:

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issues vital to attracting urban Nicaraguans and broadening international backing. To improve its political image, UNO issued a new statement of principles and goals in January 1986, established several commissions to formulate a broader political program, and took steps to counter Sandinista charges of insurgent human rights abuses.

- *Lack of insurgent unity.* UNO is making only halting progress in integrating smaller insurgent groups into a unified alliance. The Indian rebel coalition, KISAN, has publicly pledged its allegiance to UNO, but the lack of real influence within the organization probably will lead to friction with the UNO leadership.

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• **Popular involvement.** Government leaders repeatedly have stated that the population cannot remain neutral, but rather must be actively committed to defending the revolution. The Sandinistas have used a variety of means to compel popular involvement, including military conscription, creation of a large militia, and civil defense campaigns. The government also has used huge public rallies, the funerals of fallen soldiers, and warnings of an imminent US invasion to stimulate nationalism.

• **Repression.** [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] Rural villagers suspected of collaboration with the insurgents are routinely intimidated or detained, and [redacted] torture and execution of insurgents and their civilian collaborators. Relocations of the rural population to deprive the guerrillas of a support base have generally been accompanied by the burning of houses and crops, the destruction of livestock, and placement of peasants in camps where they can be more easily controlled, according to Embassy and press reports.

• **Benefits for farmers and soldiers.** The government has made accelerated agrarian reform in areas of insurgent activity the centerpiece of its efforts to gain support. In July 1985, the regime announced a plan to strengthen peasant loyalties in the critical northern zone through distribution of land, work

materials, and resources for transportation. In addition, the government has created a national commission to implement programs for former soldiers and their families.

• **Control of the media.** Press controls, imposed in March 1982, have been used to censor news of opposition activities and insurgent successes, exaggerate Army victories, and trumpet reports of rebel atrocities. The regime also has sought to deny the airwaves to the insurgents by making it a punishable offense to listen to clandestine radiobroadcasts. [redacted]

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Diplomatic Initiatives

We believe the Sandinistas have been fairly successful in their efforts to minimize foreign support for the rebels. Sandinista propaganda has capitalized on charges of guerrilla abuses of human rights and ties to the Somoza regime, and we believe the regime's active diplomacy helps account for the lack of international pressure on Managua to open talks with the insurgents. In our view, Nicaragua's portrayal of the insurgency as externally backed aggression rather than a civil war has diverted attention from the regime's repressive policies and enabled it to obtain resolutions of support in international organizations.

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The Catholic Church

Under the leadership of Cardinal Obando y Bravo, the Catholic Church hierarchy has sharply criticized many Sandinista policies and increasingly has become

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a focus for internal resistance to the regime. The Nicaraguan church generally is considered the strongest national church in Central America and enjoys immense support. In 1981, a poll conducted by the opposition newspaper *La Prensa* found that Obando was perceived as the most popular man in Nicaragua by 38 percent of Nicaraguans, with President Daniel Ortega finishing second with 13 percent. An overwhelming 71 percent supported the teaching of religion in the schools, 8 percent backed a Marxist education, and 17 percent favored a blend of the two. With this popular base, reinforced weekly in well-attended masses, the church has been a strong and constant critic of regime policies. For example:

- It has strongly resisted government efforts to compromise its autonomy, such as the ban on religious instruction during school hours.
- In October 1984, the president of the Episcopal Conference—the bishops' council—issued two "personal" letters condemning Sandinista repression and election rules favoring the government.
- Soon after the election in November 1984, the church repeated an earlier offer to mediate a national dialogue that would encompass all political forces, including the armed insurgents. As a result of this repeated offer and persistent criticism of the regime, the Sandinistas, including President Ortega, have accused the hierarchy of treason. []

The church's militancy was buttressed by the elevation of Obando to Cardinal in April 1985, which has been widely interpreted as Vatican support for his antiregime posture. En route home from his investiture in June, Obando celebrated a mass in Miami attended by FDN leader Adolfo Calero and guerrilla chief Eden Pastora—a daring political challenge to the Sandinistas, in our view. In Managua, nearly 300,000 demonstrators met the Cardinal in one of the largest gatherings since the Sandinistas took power, according to the US Embassy. In late July, the bishops denounced government efforts to undercut the church's pastoral authority and reiterated its call for a church-mediated "national dialogue" that would include the insurgents. The bishops' council also reappointed Obando as its president last October, after a

two-year lapse, to reinforce his position and present a united front, according to the US Embassy. Also in October, the Cardinal authorized publication of a newspaper that contained criticism of the military draft. The regime closed the paper before it could be disseminated and a few days later declared a new state of emergency, citing church activities as a reason for the move. Since the expanded state of emergency was announced, Obando y Bravo has defied Interior Ministry directives to cancel outdoor masses. The US Embassy reports that his tour of Nicaraguan towns has drawn large crowds despite regime efforts to reduce attendance. []

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Obando, however, remains vulnerable to pressures from within the hierarchy and from the regime. US Embassy reporting points to some divisions among the bishops about the Cardinal's confrontational tactics. The bishop in war-torn Chontales Department, for example, engaged in a separate dialogue with local Sandinista officials to ease tensions in his diocese. Obando also probably calculates that excessive opposition to the regime would invite even further repression of more vulnerable civilian dissidents. The regime already has closed the church newspaper and radio station, occupied the Managua diocese's social action and human rights offices, and detained lay activists. []

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The Sandinistas have also strongly backed the leftist "popular church" as a rival to the authority of the hierarchy, according to US Embassy reporting. The regime consistently portrays this proregime group as the "real" Nicaraguan church and uses sympathetic clergy to counter charges of persecution leveled by the traditional hierarchy. The popular clergy, however, hold no high-level posts in the traditional Catholic Church, and they do not number more than 10 percent of the priests in country, according to US Embassy [] estimates. []

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Civic Opposition: Weak but Determined

Unlike the insurgents and the church, the internal political opposition has mounted only a limited challenge to the regime. This effort is headed by a broad

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coalition—the Democratic Coordinating Board (CDN)—including democratic political parties, independent trade unions, and elements of the private sector. Although less effective in mobilizing resistance, in our view, the civic opposition has provided at least a small check on Sandinista plans to consolidate power. []

Persistent Problems

Opposition groups, in our judgment, remain weak because of continuing regime restrictions under the expanded state of emergency, failure to find a political strategy to put the Sandinistas on the defensive, and the absence of effective leadership. After making some gains in domestic and international visibility during the 1984 election campaign, the political opposition adopted a reactive strategy, and its ability to challenge the government declined. As a result of boycotting the election, opposition parties lost their legal status. Although Managua has not yet exercised its legal authority to disband the parties, it has clamped down on their leaders since the October 1985 emergency decree. The opposition's power to make its voice heard also has been limited by its absence from the National Assembly and the resumption of heavy media censorship. Conversations between opposition leaders and US Embassy personnel consistently underscore the CDN's lack of direction and inability to expand its constituencies beyond the shrinking urban middle class. []

In addition, the Sandinistas' expanded state of emergency has tightened their control over the press and prompted a ban on political organizing activities. The regime used the legal framework of the decree to intensify harassment of political dissidents, detaining several hundred in the weeks after the measures were announced. []

The US Embassy reports that coalition members have been divided over how to respond and the extent to which the opposition should participate in political structures dominated by the regime. Majority opinion, led by the private sector, holds that any cooperation with the government lends legitimacy to the regime and reduces the credibility of the CDN as an opposition force. A minority, headed by the Social Christian Party (PSC), has argued that the coalition

should directly engage the Sandinistas, if only to gain marginal concessions and avoid the image of intransigence. Press and US Embassy reporting indicates that such disputes have occurred most recently over whether to submit suggestions for a new constitution. Similarly divisive debates have taken place over whether to cooperate with the legally recognized parties. []

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In our view, the opposition's lack of talented and charismatic figures has severely reduced its effectiveness. The departure from Nicaragua in early 1985 of former presidential candidate Arturo Cruz and *La Prensa* editor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro removed the only political leaders with both national and international stature. In addition, personal rivalries have caused divisions within and between opposition parties, according to the US Embassy. The coalition presidency rotates among the parties every six months to permit each to share the limelight, and this arrangement appears to have absorbed the opposition's energy and deprived it of a single spokesperson who could command international attention. []

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We view the CDN's lack of international recognition and credibility as an additional limiting factor on its impact. Members have made only halfhearted efforts to cultivate support abroad. Opposition leaders have admitted to the US Embassy their reluctance to maintain contacts with foreign media, which they consider pro-Sandinista. []

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Some Opposition Vigor

There have been several recent indications of increased efforts within the coalition to counteract the problems posed by weak leadership, a narrow base, and lack of action. []

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In the months before last October's expanded state of emergency decree, some members of the coalition were actively seeking to broaden their constituencies. The CDN labor affiliates were exploiting worker discontent to attract new supporters, according to the US Embassy, which notes that several locals have withdrawn from proregime unions. Opposition political parties were also devoting increased attention to

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The Internal Opposition

The main opposition coalition, plagued by internal disputes and increasingly hemmed in by the expanded state of emergency decreed last October, has been reluctant to assume the political risks entailed in consistently defying the regime. Dissidents, who lack charismatic leaders, have been unable to define a political strategy to put the Sandinistas on the defensive. The opposition's power to make its voice heard has been further limited by its absence from the National Assembly—it fielded no candidates in the 1984 election—and the resumption of heavy media censorship. As a result, constituent members of the coalition have pursued their own strategies for coping with the regime. We see little likelihood of any sustained challenge to FSLN policies by the civic opposition during the next year. Internal disputes and regime maneuvering to sow dissension probably will continue to preclude the creation of a truly united and effective resistance in the short term.

Main Opposition Groups

The Democratic Coordinating Board (CDN) is the main opposition coalition, composed of moderate and conservative anti-Sandinista political parties and business and labor organizations. Accurate membership figures for the constituent groups are elusive, but rosters are small. The CDN includes the:

Party	Remarks
Democratic Conservative Party of Nicaragua (PCDN)	Led by Mario Rappaccioli, the PCDN was the largest opposition party under Somoza. It has been hurt by leadership feuds and is split into four factions, two of which work with the regime.

Social Democratic Party (PSD)

Led by Luis Rivas, the PSD was organized in 1979 and has unsuccessfully sought membership in the Socialist International. Rivas has served as CDN president and is considered a possible candidate when elections are held again.

Social Christian Party (PSC)

Led by Erick Ramirez, the PSC is 20 years old with strong ties to other Christian Democratic parties in Europe and Latin America. The PSC has strong differences with CDN leaders and is currently boycotting coalition meetings. Favors reaching a modus vivendi with the regime. The Sandinistas have restored the PSC's legal status in an apparent effort to cultivate ties.

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Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC)

Led by Alfredo Reyes, the PLC is the smallest and least influential of the CDN parties.

Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP)

Led by the dynamic Enrique Bolanos, COSEP is a private-sector umbrella group formed in 1972. It broke with the FSLN in 1980 and is now the opposition voice for middle- and upper-income members of the CDN. Bolanos may assume a more active role in the CDN this year, according to US Embassy reporting.

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Nicaraguan Workers Central (CTN)	Led by Carlos Huembes, the CTN is split into two factions, with Huembes heading those loyal to the CDN. Membership is small, perhaps totaling 3,500.	Independent Liberal Party (PLI) (9)	Currently led by Virgilio Godoy, a former cabinet minister. The PLI is a left-of-center democratic party allied with the regime from 1980 until early 1984. Godoy has become increasingly critical of the Sandinistas and has sought an alliance with the CDN, which rejected his overtures because of his close ties to the regime.
Confederation for Labor Unification (CUS)	Led by Alvin Guthrie, the CUS has strong ties to the AFL-CIO. It has a strong organizational structure, but is poorly funded and it has approached the AFL-CIO for assistance. In 1983 the CUS claimed 10,000 members in 35 affiliates. <input type="text"/>	Popular Social Christian Party (PPSC) (6)	Led by Mauricio Diaz, the PPSC is a left-of-center democratic party broadly supportive of the regime but critical of some domestic policies.

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The Legal Opposition

The legal opposition is composed of parties that participated in the 1984 elections and hold seats in the National Assembly proportionate to their electoral performance. Some of the parties strongly support the Sandinistas, while others are badly split over regime policies. In order of representation in the National Assembly, they include the:

Party (Seats in National Assembly)	Remarks
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Democratic Conservative Party (PCD) (14)	Led by former junta member Rafael Cordova, the PCD is a break-away from main opposition Conservatives and generally supports the regime. It has a small anti-FSLN faction.
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Popular Action Movement— Marxist-Leninist (MAP-ML) (2)
--

Communist Party of Nicaragua (PCdeN) (2)

Nicaraguan Socialist (PSN) (2)

Headed by Isidro Tellez, the MAP-ML is a small, ultraleftist party critical of the regime for moving too slowly toward Communism.

Led by Eli Altamirano, the PCdeN is a hardline Communist party ideologically similar to MAP-ML.

Led by Gustavo Tablada, the PSN is the Moscow-line Communist party allied with the regime from 1980 to 1984. It has been critical of Sandinista repression.

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grassroots political organizing, according to the US Embassy, and attracting crowds—some as large as 300—at local rallies in small towns. []

The private-sector association, under the dynamic leadership of Enrique Bolanos, has increasingly criticized Sandinista economic policies and has sponsored a series of well-attended meetings with businessmen throughout Nicaragua to broaden opposition to the government. CDN representatives also have been traveling extensively, including a tour of West European and key South American countries, to win international support. []

Ties to the Insurgents

Even though the opposition views the insurgents—principally the FDN—as critical in slowing Sandinista consolidation, the CDN has avoided direct endorsements and close identification that would invite Sandinista retaliation. As a result, CDN public statements have been limited to a call for a “national dialogue” between the government and all its opponents, including the insurgents. The opposition also has supported the insurgents by resisting government pressure to condemn insurgent attacks, justifying its refusal by arguing that the war is a consequence of the regime’s policies. []

Some opposition figures have discreetly contacted insurgent leaders during their visits abroad over the past several years. Such meetings rarely involve more than an exchange of views. []

Nevertheless, in the case of the CDN’s election strategy and in the decision by UNO and the CDN to issue similar political statements in February and March 1985, the insurgents and the internal opposition reportedly have coordinated their actions. []

For their part, FDN leaders have said they value the civic opposition as a useful and necessary part of the struggle against the Sandinistas. The rebels apparently want political and business leaders to stay in Nicaragua and leave en masse only at a later stage of the war. There is no indication that the insurgents are pressing the opposition either to become more defiant or to become part of their limited internal front activity. At the same time, in our view, they probably want to make certain that the CDN holds firm in opposing any accommodation with the regime. []

Popular Discontent: Strong but Amorphous

Sandinista policies have alienated many Nicaraguans who had strongly backed them during the civil war against Somoza, according to press, US Embassy, and [] In general, citizens are angered by what they believe are the regime’s heavy-handed tactics to force popular involvement in the revolution and meddling in their daily lives. Nevertheless, the insurgents, the church, and civic opposition have had only limited success in capitalizing on growing popular dissatisfaction. []

Points of Contention

The regime outlawed public-opinion polling in 1981, making current levels of discontent difficult to gauge, but abundant anecdotal evidence indicates substantial dissatisfaction. US Embassy and press reports indicate that key sources of discontent include:

- *Economic distress.* Economic conditions have deteriorated since the revolution for every sector except for a small minority of Nicaraguans. According to US Embassy reporting, we estimate that inflation topped 300 percent in 1985. The US Embassy reports soaring prices for meat and cooking oil and periodic shortages of beans and rice—all lower-class diet staples. Industrial activity is down at least 25 percent since 1979, unemployment is over 20 percent, and personal consumption has dropped sharply for most Nicaraguans. Government austerity measures, especially reductions in subsidies and social programs, have created additional hardships, according to US Embassy reporting.

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- *Military conscription.* The military draft, implemented for the first time in Nicaraguan history in late 1983, remains one of the regime's most controversial moves, although government propaganda and policies have diminished public protests in recent months. The [redacted] is widely perceived to be a party organ intended to keep the regime in power rather than to defend national sovereignty. According to the US Embassy and [redacted] evasion is widespread—nearly half of those drafted last September in Managua failed to report—and the desertion rate among draftees is high.
- *Antichurch policies and ideological indoctrination.* Regime harassment of the Catholic Church has generated considerable resentment. Many Nicaraguans are especially angered by the teaching of Marxist doctrine in the schools and government involvement in selection of faculty in church schools, according to US Embassy reporting. As recently as mid-November 1985, according to a censored press item from the independent newspaper *La Prensa*, parents were complaining that teachers forced students to buy and read proregime newspapers, according to US Embassy reporting.
- *The Sandinista Defense Committees.* Like their Cuban equivalents, the defense committees—which the government claims have 500,000 members—are block organizations intended to enforce conformity to regime policies at the local level. According to US Embassy and [redacted] participation in committee activities has been a prerequisite for obtaining ration cards necessary to purchase scarce foodstuffs and for access to a range of social services. [redacted] many urban Nicaraguans resent the intrusiveness of these organizations. [redacted]

Limited Resistance

Although popular dissatisfaction with regime policies appears deep and widespread, there have been relatively few instances of resistance to the government. Most local and foreign observers agree that the Nicaraguan public is traditionally passive and difficult to mobilize. Popular sentiments against Somoza's

rule were strong, for example, but few openly supported the rebels until the last year of the insurgency. We believe most Nicaraguans are intimidated by the Sandinista security apparatus, which is far more pervasive than Somoza's. Moreover, the inability of the political opposition to project itself more forcefully and the failure of the insurgents to give the appearance of being able to overcome the regime probably have served to inhibit public protests. [redacted]

Incidents of spontaneous popular protests have focused on key issues that affect Nicaraguans personally. For example, economic protests have included some strikes, a few reported incidents of industrial sabotage, and scattered violence in the markets. In addition, Nicaraguans show their discontent with less risky activities, such as attendance at masses celebrated by opposition clergy, which are often only thinly veiled protest meetings. [redacted]

Even though the population remains generally quiescent, the Sandinistas apparently are concerned about their eroded popular base and closely monitor the public mood. In early October 1984, for example, the US Embassy reported that the FSLN had conducted its own public-opinion survey, which detected little enthusiasm for the election scheduled for the following month. [redacted]

Outlook

We expect the armed opposition to lead and, in some measure, fuel the opposition as a whole. There are dimmer prospects for a sudden growth in activity by the unarmed opposition, but, in our view, the regime's lack of popularity will be an important vulnerability. [redacted]

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The Insurgency—Tied to External Support

We see little likelihood that the insurgents can defeat the Sandinistas in the coming year, even though they have continued to make strides militarily and will probably improve further. Nevertheless, the guerrillas' combat effectiveness will hinge primarily on their ability to sustain external support and establish a reliable logistic network to bring materiel through neighboring countries and then on to units inside Nicaragua. []

At present levels of support, assuming the logistic problems are resolved, we believe that the insurgents can at least sustain their current force level of about 19,000. In themselves, improved delivery capabilities into Nicaragua, in our view, would probably allow for at least some expansion of the guerrillas' area of operations. The rebels could, for example, return in strength to Boaco and Chontales, where they could pose a greater threat to the Rama road and force the Sandinistas to split their forces. In the north, with Honduran permission, the rebels could infiltrate further west of their main base at Yamales, allowing them to bring the war to the more populated areas of the country. []

Over time, however, without increased external support, we would expect to see a gradual shift of the strategic balance to Managua as its own capabilities continue to improve and the rebels fail to keep pace. The insurgents would probably remain especially vulnerable to Sandinista airpower, forcing them eventually into a defensive posture. Moreover, at current levels of external aid, the FDN cannot adequately resupply either Indian rebels or newly won allies in the south, reducing their incentives to cooperate and denying the insurgents the four-front war they seek. Moreover, without aid increases to the rebels, Nicaragua's neighbors would likely have continued doubts about the ultimate viability of the insurgency. []

We judge that increased nonlethal assistance, especially if it included funds for transport aircraft, would provide a major boost to rebel fortunes. []
[] the lack of uniforms, boots, and other such equipment—not light weapons—has inhibited the growth of the rebel force since last spring. Stepped-up deliveries of quartermaster supplies, in

our view, would facilitate growth of the rebel forces, perhaps to as high as 25,000 by 1987. If military equipment were included, especially air defense weaponry, the rebels eventually could hope to counter the Sandinistas' helicopter threat. In addition, steady resupply of forces inside Nicaragua would permit prolonged stays in the field, making the rebels an even more credible threat. The FDN would also be able to strengthen their supply relationships and, therefore, their ties to Indian rebels and recent defectors from Pastora's forces. This in turn could lead to greater operations in those areas. []

Even with increased aid, however, the rebels will remain vulnerable to their own internal difficulties and uncertain support from Honduras and Costa Rica. Persistent administrative, leadership, and training weaknesses that have hindered the war effort are not susceptible to quick fixes. Honduras may again reduce support to the insurgents in response to embarrassing publicity over US aid or a perceived lack of commitment on the part of external supporters to the insurgency. Costa Rican President-elect Arias is unlikely to expand his support to the insurgents even if they receive increased external aid. Indeed, San Jose has long vacillated on its policy toward Nicaragua and most recently has agreed to a border commission staffed by the Contadora countries to monitor the border with Nicaragua. []

Although the rebels are unlikely to defeat the Sandinistas in the next year, a strategic stalemate at higher levels of fighting probably will further weaken the regime. The Sandinistas publicly have stated that the costs of the war have placed the economy on a survival footing, which we believe will preclude significant capital investments and improved living standards. As a result, we see little prospect that the regime can reverse the decline in its popular base in coming months, despite accelerated land distribution and other measures to shore up working-class support. Further, the steady erosion of civil liberties is likely to continue to undermine Managua's international political support and lead to aid reductions. []

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Key Role for the Church

Inside Nicaragua, Cardinal Obando y Bravo will remain the principal rallying force for opposition to the regime. [REDACTED]

The Pope sent the Nicaraguan bishops an open letter criticizing repression of the church and encouraging continued opposition in mid-December, indicating continued strong backing from the Vatican. Moreover, we judge the regime will be unable to discredit Obando, and his immense popular base in Nicaragua will give the prelate the credibility and the forum that elude other opposition leaders. [REDACTED]

At present, the Cardinal is unlikely, in our opinion, to move significantly out in front of his political allies or his fellow bishops by calling for antigovernment demonstrations or openly supporting the insurgents. Nonetheless, some of the church activities over the last year have been all but unprecedented—such as attempting to establish a newspaper—and Obando and the Sandinistas remain on a slow but sure collision course even if both sides occasionally temporize and step back. Heightened government repression, therefore, could embolden the bishops. [REDACTED]

Continued Opposition Difficulties

We see little likelihood of any sustained challenge to FSLN policies by the civic opposition. Internal disputes and regime maneuvering to sow dissension probably will continue to preclude the creation of a truly united and effective opposition over the next year. Dissidents are likely to look for ways to resist the regime and attack government policies, but we judge they will stop short of openly supporting the insurgents because they fear retaliation, and because politicians and businessmen will assume more risk only when convinced the insurgency has established undeniable momentum in both urban and rural areas. They are likely, however, to engage in more frequent contacts and consultations with rebel leaders outside the country. [REDACTED]

Limited Popular Response

In our view, sporadic protests may increase because of deteriorating economic conditions though destabilizing civil disturbances are unlikely. We judge that

urban Nicaraguans will continue to avoid taking political risks in the face of government repression and in the absence of charismatic leaders or guerrilla actions in urban areas. Moreover, the government will try to cushion the impact of its policies to defuse discontent. Managua preceded the latest military draft, for example, with an intense publicity campaign calling attention to the timely release of those conscripted in 1983 and the benefits they would receive, and it avoided mass roundups. Nonetheless, we believe the Sandinistas will not compromise their drive to consolidate a Marxist-Leninist state, and intensified political repression, especially if aimed at the church, almost certainly will reinforce antiregime sentiments. [REDACTED]

As antigovernment feelings intensify, we believe some of those previously neutral toward the rebels will become increasingly proinsurgent, providing a source of recruits and local logistic support. We also expect more spontaneous—if small—acts of defiance, such as strikes and demonstrations. Weekly masses and other religious gatherings probably will remain the most important outlets for discontent. Nevertheless, we believe the timidity of the populace will persist unless the Nicaraguans come to believe the rebels pose a serious threat to the regime—a perception that is unlikely to develop during the next year even if the guerrillas receive military assistance from abroad. [REDACTED]

Implications for the United States

A stronger and more viable insurgency would confront the Sandinistas with the prospect of a long and costly war that they may ultimately lose, placing increased pressure on them to make negotiating concessions in regional peace talks. While initially Managua is likely to continue to take a hard line and refuse to make any significant concessions either in Contadora talks or with the internal opposition, over time this resolve may weaken in the face of more intense fighting. Much will depend on the ability of the insurgency to increase its political viability and to

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Indicators of Alternative Outcomes

A number of variables figure in our estimate that there will be no major military breakthrough on either side over the next 18 months: insurgent strategy and capabilities; external aid and support to the insurgents and the Sandinistas; behavior of the internal opposition; and regime strategy and ability to maintain sufficient popular support to retain power. Below are indicators in key areas that we believe would point to a stronger—or weaker—opposition than we have estimated. []

Insurgent Strategy and Capabilities

We would foresee a more successful insurgency if the guerrillas:

- *Stabilized their logistics pipeline and delivery into Nicaragua.*
 - *Developed sustained operations in urban areas.*
 - *Improved their air defense capabilities to counter the threat posed by Sandinista helicopters.*
 - *Established a secure base inside Nicaragua.*
 - *Forged a truly unified front with a political program capable of attracting international attention.*
- []

We would foresee a less successful insurgency if:

- *Serious rifts developed within the guerrilla political or military leadership.*

- *Guerrilla commander Bermudez were assassinated or otherwise removed from command.*
- *Insurgents committed serious human rights violations.* []

External Aid to Insurgents

We would foresee a more successful insurgency if:

- *The guerrillas received advice in strategy, tactics, urban operations, and political strategy.*
- *The Hondurans strengthened their commitment to the insurgents and placed fewer restrictions on infiltration and exfiltration routes.*
- *The Costa Ricans allowed more guerrilla operations from their territory.* []

We would foresee a considerably weakened guerrilla movement if:

- *Tegucigalpa continued or tightened controls over the flow of supplies coming into Honduras.*
 - *The Hondurans or Costa Ricans placed additional restrictions on infiltration and exfiltration routes.*
- []

The Internal Opposition

We would expect to see the opposition assume a more aggressive posture toward the regime if:

bring the war closer to major urban areas in western Nicaragua. In the event the insurgency becomes both a greater political and military threat, Managua may be tempted to accept a less advantageous Contadora treaty in an effort to end external support to the guerrillas. Nevertheless, such a treaty may fall short of minimal US objectives for a regional peace settlement, especially on internal reconciliation and democratization. []

As long as the Sandinistas expect that official US funding for the insurgents will eventually be terminated, we judge they are unlikely to abandon their belief that they can contain a rural-based insurgency and outlast the guerrillas over the long run. Indeed, although we believe the Sandinistas would probably

consider making significant concessions to the opposition—including peace talks with the insurgents or an offer to call new elections—to forestall the total destruction of the revolution, there is a possibility that no amount of insurgent military or domestic political pressure will induce the Sandinistas to make fundamental concessions. Numerous Sandinista statements attest to their determination not to give in to external forces at any cost. We believe that hardliners would push for adoption of desperation tactics—such as widespread terrorism—to increase the costs to the United States rather than accept terms for a democratic regime that would end Sandinista rule. []

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- Dissidents increased coordination of activities with insurgents.
- The CDN selected a president who commands the respect of all coalition members.
- Opposition organizations intensified grassroots organizing and planned political protests and other acts to defy regime restrictions.
- Cardinal Obando decided to assume a more active role in opposing the government, including questioning the legitimacy of the regime.

We would expect the fortunes of the internal opposition to deteriorate if:

- The Vatican, concerned about its long-term interests in Nicaragua, ordered Obando to assume a lower profile or reach an accommodation with the regime.
- Obando lost support of some of his bishops, threatening church unity.
- Internal rifts worsened, perhaps signaled by the departure of a member party from the coalition or a bitter leadership dispute.

FSLN Strategy

Although the Sandinistas face only gradual erosion of their popular base if present trends continue,

political or military missteps by the regime could significantly bolster prospects for both the insurgents and the unarmed opposition. Such miscalculations could include:

- Assassination of key opposition leaders.
- Increase in human rights abuses, especially in urban areas.
- Resumption of impressment gangs and other coercive tactics to fill draft quotas.
- Severe repression of the church, including closure of churches, expulsion of priests, and official violence against the clergy.

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On the military side the Sandinistas would become more vulnerable if they:

- Failed to counteract the threat that rebel SA-7 surface-to-air missiles pose to their helicopters.
- Were unable to stop an expanded guerrilla resupply effort.
- Suffered a decisive defeat in the field.
- Launched a large-scale attack into Honduras to destroy rebel bases.

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Stepped-up aid to the anti-Sandinista insurgents—particularly renewal of military aid—probably would cause concern among US allies in Western Europe and Latin America, but specific reactions would vary considerably. Washington's allies probably will look for a strong US commitment that it still seeks a negotiated solution to regional conflicts. Although they may criticize US policy, the Contadora countries are unlikely to abandon their efforts to promote a regional settlement. Should the insurgents be able to improve their military position substantially, we believe foreign governments would bring increased pressure on Managua to negotiate with the guerrillas.

We believe a less effective insurgency would probably eliminate Sandinista incentives to make any negotiating concessions within the Contadora framework, and it would improve their ability to reach advantageous bilateral agreements. Although Managua publicly argues that it cannot make any concessions while subject to external aggression, the regime is unlikely to be significantly more conciliatory if the insurgency were weakened. The Sandinistas probably would be willing to undertake a dialogue with the internal opposition to satisfy international public opinion, but the terms would be over what trappings of pluralism,

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private enterprise, and political nonalignment they would allow to remain. Honduras and Costa Rica, for their part, would be likely to conclude bilateral agreements with Managua, thereby undermining the Contadora process. Alternatively, Nicaragua may be able to conclude a much more favorable Contadora treaty.

[REDACTED]

The continued presence of an internal opposition, despite its more limited possibilities to challenge the regime, serves as a witness to Sandinista repression. The civil opposition still has more international credibility than the insurgents, and its quiet support for the rebels aids the guerrillas in their quest for international legitimacy. Conversely, we believe the insurgent cause would be greatly damaged if the church and civic opposition were to come to terms with the regime.

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